
P. Gerard Damsteegt

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/p_gerard_damsteegt/44/
Magnificent Disappointment: What really happened in 1844...


Magnificent Disappointment is a popularly written book in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Great Disappointment of 1844 when the hopes of Adventists were dashed when Jesus did not return. C. Mervyn Maxwell, one of the finest Seventh-day Adventist historians, attempts to explain the meaning of 1844 and its relevancy for today.

As a result of teaching SDA history for 25 years the author has gained a grasp of the traumatic events that took place in 1844 that few have. Instead of an embarrassing disappointment he presents it as a “magnificent disappointment” because it gave Adventists “a special message about Jesus” (p. 5). While Adventists share many soteriological and eschatological doctrines with Christians at large, the great disappointments led to a deeper understandings in many areas, but specifically the intercessory work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary in the end time.

Maxwell shows that 1844 derives its significance from the prophecies of the Son of man coming to the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7) and the cleansing of the sanctuary in the time of the end (Daniel 8). He maintains that 1844 not only provides the basic reason the Seventh-day Adventists exist but is a major motivating factor in many of their doctrines, their global mission, medical and
education program. It is one of the most significant signs of Jesus soon return and the powerful force of seeking to be like Jesus.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with how Adventists arrived at October 22, 1844. It shows that their prophetic time calculations are not unique but the culmination of a nearly 1000 years tradition of famous expositors who have used similar hermeneutics in determining the meaning of the cleansing of the sanctuary. It deals frankly with the mistakes that were made in prophetic chronology and shows how further study of the Bible solved their predicament.

The second part investigates what exactly happened in prophetic history in 1844. It brings out that the disappointment led to new insights into the nature of Christ’s work in the final judgment. This convinced Adventists that the time had arrived for the special proclamation of God’s final offer of repentance to the world because the “hour of His judgment has come” (Rev 14:7). Christ had begun His final ministry in preparation for His return and Adventists were called to share this message about Jesus with other Christians as well as non-Christians.

The last part explores the deeper significance of 1844. It shows its far-reaching implications for being an Adventist, for Sabbath-keeping, worship, lifestyle, readiness for the second advent and being like Jesus.

The author concludes his work with a summary capturing his overall message: “The great disappointment of 1844 was a dark cloud for those who experienced it, but its brilliant silver lining has turned it into a magnificent disappointment for everyone who has perceived its true meaning. The silver lining is, of course,
Jesus and His grand new work of judgment and atonement in heaven and of gathering and totally renewing His people down on the earth” (175).

The book is a unique contribution to a subject that has been oft studied by scholars in recent years. Most of these studies have confined themselves to the period surrounding 1844 and its historic significance. Maxwell, however, takes the episode and makes it relevant for today by asking the “so-what” questions and answering the “why” questions that have troubled Adventists since inception. He is very clear that many Seventh-day Adventist doctrines hinge on this formative period in Adventist history. His study clearly affirms Paul Schwarzenau’s observation of Adventism that “it is very much to the point that Adventist doctrine is rooted in and derives strength from an event which Adventists later referred to as ’the great disappointment’” (So Much in Common, pp.

The author presents 1844 as a landmark without which Seventh-day Adventism cannot exist. It gives the distinct impression that if Seventh-day Adventists are true to their Biblical mission they cannot fulfill their calling without sharing the message of Jesus that emerged from the prophetic time calculations of Daniel 8:14. Aa few have addressed this vital connection the book certainly fills a great vacuum.

The book is written from a viewpoint of faith and it is designed to rekindle enthusiasm in the prophetic messages for the end-time. To the inquisitive mind the book will present an opportunity to take a fresh look at prophetic passages that are relevant for today. The author’s engaging style of writing will hold the attention of most readers till the end.
As with most popular books, the subject matter is not treated exhaustively, but this was undoubtedly not the author’s intention. However, Maxwell skillfully condenses abundant complex historical and theological data in a manner that can be digested and appreciated by specialists as well as non-specialists.

This book will be valuable reading for anyone desiring to understand the theological roots of Seventh-day Adventism and the deeper motivations that have made it a vibrant movement with its major objective to prepare the world for Christ’s return.

P. Gerard Damsteegt

Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104